

Arvada

United Methodist Church

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by Rusty Butler

Sermon – Part of the Story

Last week, Valerie explained to us a theory of understanding using the terms pre-critical naivete, critical thinking, and post critical naivete. We watched a short clip from Dr. Marcus Borg talking about this way of seeing things particularly with respect to the birth narratives which we find in the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke.

It is not easy to move from stage to stage. I have at various times thought to myself I am never going to get to this third stage. For crying out loud, I'm still waiting to become a mature adult, let alone try to think and act like one...

With regard to the Christmas story, I don't know if I can do it, to move into the post critical naivete stage. I don't know. From the beginning, I liked the whole story, Joseph and the virgin Mary, baby Jesus, beautiful Bethlehem, all the animals, the angels, a big star in the night, the cattle are lowing the baby awakes but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes. No crying baby...you can't beat that. The little drummer boy banging his drum, rumpa pum pum. Isn't there a little drummer boy in there? Then, there are the presents of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Lynne Kendall, told me about one young fellow who heard instead, that the gifts were gold, common sense and fur.

The Christmas story is a story we've grown up with and it is in our bones, in our heads, in our hearts. I don't know if some of us can ever get to a post-critical naivete about it.

I tried to be of some help on Wednesday during the Bible study class, talking about seeing the story through the lens of a post critical naivete. It didn't work,

one of the members said, “ah, now you just ruined it for me!” She was teasing...I think.

I don't know if I actually got through to the class about these birth narratives or not. About two thirds of the way through class one of the class members said, Now exactly when did these three wisemen come to see Jesus?”

The theory is that if we can see the stories with a post-critical naiveté, a whole new and greater dimension will open up to us. So how do we do it, how do we get to that post critical naivete with the birth narratives. Will we catch some glimpses of truth about ourselves and about humanity? Oh I hope I just don't ruin it for you!

Will you pray with me?

Source of all that is, may our meditations today open us to greater dimensions about who we are and about our relationships with each other. Amen.

Some of you, I know, had the chance to see the Children's Christmas Pageant last week. If you didn't get to see it, you can go to the website and find the video on the Minister's Blog or in the Children's area. We did something that this church hasn't done before and that is we had someone right up front videotaping the pageant, and showing it on the big screen in the sanctuary as it was happening. The camera would pan over the faces of our children while the pageant was going on. That is a whole different way of seeing it.

People all the way in the back of the sanctuary could see the innocent look on the angels faces, they could see the sheep kind of in a daze, and Joseph looking around wondering, “what am I doing here?” which you know probably wasn't too far away from the actual story.

We saw things we probably weren't meant to see, for instance if you watch it, you will see one close up of one of the shepherd's yawning a huge yawn right during the part of the story where Jesus is born.

But you will see the shining star which the wise men followed. I thought the star really was the star of the play even though I knew it was supposed to be Jesus, but Jesus was just a baby doll so that didn't do it for me.

At the end, you will notice, as the different characters come off the chancel area, the kings stop and bows, the one in the middle really gave a royal bow, to the congregation. I suspect, knowing that kid, that that was unrehearsed. One of the characters glimpsed himself on the big screen and started to wave his hand around to see what that would look like on the big screen. I've done that before.

There are things you won't see on the video though. As the service started, Valerie announced to the congregation that if any children wanted to be in the pageant, but didn't have a chance to go to rehearsal, they were still welcome and they needed to just get up and go get their costumes on. Five children came up out of the congregation to do that. You don't get to see that in the video.

There was one section that we had to remove from the video, Chuck Smith, our videographer got about 15 seconds of the backside of one of our directors who stood up in front of him as he was filming. When I told her later what had happened, she explained that she stood up to address one of the sheep, who had his hands down his pants, and she was asking him whether or not he needed to go to the restroom. He looked at her and never taking his hands out of his pants said, "no!" like, "what's wrong with you, lady?!"

We edited that part out...

Anyway it was great fun. I think one of the reasons people like to see the children's pageants, is that every child gets to have a part, whether it is as a king, or a wise guy, or a shepherd, or a sheep or camels or a donkey, or angels, or Joseph or Mary...everyone gets a part in the story. It is good to be part of the story.

And I wonder, in my try at figuring out this story using a post critical naivete, if the characters that Luke inserts into the story aren't there to tell us just that in a metaphorical way...That we are all part of the story.

Think about it, there are the shepherds, who were the outcasts of society, there are the angels, not just one but a whole gaggle of them representing the heavenly realm, there are the animals. It is as if, the whole of creation was waiting and recognizing this special one.

I say that because in my understanding, in reading the Gospels, that seems to me to be a large part of the stories of Jesus interacting with others.

Prostitutes, Tax Collectors, the sick, the lame, the blind, sinners, roman Centurians, fishermen, women, lepers, priests, gentiles, if not every section of society is represented in the stories of Jesus then a great many of them are.

Where the Romans relegated those who were not Romans to not even a second class citizenship, and where the Temple and the priests drew such a firm line in the sand about who was included and who was excluded...it seems like the story of Jesus at least in part was to make sure that all sorts of people were drawn in to what came to be called the Kingdom of God...in other words, part of the story is that we are all part of the story.

Of course, we all, at different parts of time want to be part of the larger story and we never know how that will turn out. Last week, Schawn Kellogg, our Iliff intern, asked if she could meet Lynne Kendall and I down at Civic Center Park and help hand out sack lunches to the people down there. I said sure. So we got the sack lunches which the youth group had made on Sunday night and went down and met Schawn and her sister Shanie down at the corner of 14th and Broadway.

It takes about 20 minutes or so to hand out those lunches. During that time, a young man, maybe in his early twenties came up and asked for a lunch. He was flamboyant. Kind of a loud talker. We gave him a sack lunch and a bottle of water and then he proceeded to move over to where Schawn was standing and he began to tell her his story. I have a feeling he thought I was in no mood for it. But she's nicer than me so he went to tell her. Pretty soon I noticed that his voice was getting louder, and more shrill and he was using some pretty colorful language. I thought to myself, I wonder if our Iliff intern ever hears that kind of language at

liff? But I looked at her face, and she was just so calm and serene as she was listening to him, nodding along as he was telling her his story. And then I remembered, “Oh Schawn is an emergency room nurse, there’s probably not a lot that can throw her off her game. “

She got to be part of the story with that young man.

This week I called down to this place run by the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. I talked to the person in charge there and said I needed to talk to one of the people who was staying there. She went down to the room and got him on the phone. And we talked about getting them into the house that someone from the church had donated for a few months and how I’d go pick them up the next day or so. And as we were talking I just asked him how they were doing on food. I waited for his answer and just silence...What’s a person supposed to do with that?

All of a sudden I had been moved from outside the story to the story being right there.

We got them moved in to the house, many of you have brought things that family can use. You’ve brought in beds, and dishes, and cleaning supplies and furniture. You’ve given a Christmas tree and clothing and you’ve given them presents and food. You are part of their story. I like to think it’s God’s story. I like to think that that is part of the story of Christmas, to give and to give and as we give to let our hearts fill to overflowing because of the giving.

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